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Religion, Conflict and Peace

David Little

RELIGION, CONFLICT AND PEACE *

David Little †

Thank you very much, Calvin. I appreciate the introduction and I am very pleased to be a participant in this conference. As Calvin and I were saying privately earlier, this subject is an inter-disciplinarian one, and, therefore, it is very appropriate for lawyers and people like me to be conversing about it. Incidentally, I should say that I am going to change the title of my remarks slightly to "Religion, Conflict and Peace." I shall comment on "reconciliation" in passing, but I consider that a sub-part of a broader concern of religious peacemakers.

The question of religion, conflict and peace came to worldwide attention with the decline of the Cold War and the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Discussion of the connection of religion and violent national or civil conflict emerged in earnest in the early 1990s as a result of the dissolution of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. That was true most obviously, of course, in the former Yugoslavia, with the occurrence of the ethno-national conflicts we are all familiar with in Bosnia-Herzogovina and in Kosovo, but in other places as well, such as Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian outpost in Azerebajan. There were even suggestions of, ethno-religious conflict in places like Ukraine [no "the" for sensitive political reasons!] at the time we began our work on religion and nationalism at the United States Institute of Peace in the early 1990s. Fortunately, political developments there reduced, the chances of ethnic and religious violence, though ethnic tensions between the eastern and western parts of Ukraine remain things to watch.

Moreover, many of the ethno-religious conflicts in other parts of the world that we have become familiar with—for example, Sri Lanka, the Sudan, Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland, Kashmir, Cyprus and so on—were all cast in a new light as a result of the changing international climate. So long as we looked at the conflicts through the lens of the Cold War, we saw them either as functions of east-west rivalry or as unimportant sideshows.

However, what is important to remember is that, while the Cold War existed, conflicts like Sri Lanka, the Sudan, Bosnia, Israel/Palestine, and Northern Ireland, were there all along, but were unnoticed or not taken seriously. It was not that these conflicts suddenly erupted when the Cold War ended; it was that we began to perceive them in a new way.

On the other hand, there is a growing interest in the constructive side of religion, and not just its destructive side. The subject of religion and peace work, if we may call it that, can, interestingly enough, also be traced to the demise of the Cold War. I have in mind the manifest role of religious actors in places like East Germany and Poland in bringing about the nonviolent transformation from authoritarianism to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The transformation was also linked to successful nonviolent action by more secular groups in places like former Czechoslovakia, and by religious groups in places outside the West, such as the Philippines, where, as you recall, nonviolent religious groups, aided by the inactivity of the army, overthrew President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. This whole movement was further linked to the peaceful transformation of South Africa in the early 1990s, something that has been alluded to already, and to the development, in part, of religiously-inspired truth and reconciliation commissions as a way of overcoming the hostility and antagonism created between the races as a result of the brutality of the previous South African regime. Incidentally, the South African case is very interesting in this regard because the Dutch Reformed Church, as many of you will recall, spent much of its life reinforcing and supporting the Afrikaaner regime, but then at a critical point in the early 1980s reversed itself, and proceeded to help undermine the legitimacy of the Afrikaaner regime. So, in a rather dramatic way, religion played a two-sided role South Africa.

Much of this is related to the role of religion in what are called, transitional societies, namely, societies moving from authoritarianism to democracy. It is in those societies that truth and reconciliation commissions, comparable to the one in South Africa, have proliferated as a way of coping with the violators associated with authoritarian regimes, as well as of finding a new "restorative" kind of justice that would either replace or serve as a supplement to, retributive justice. This development is extremely important, and while we cannot say it is only religion that is behind these developments, the religious aspect of these important political and legal developments is highly significant.

I would say, in short, that there has been a kind of revolution in thinking about violent conflict and the constructive role of religion. There is a growing interest among religious practitioners in conflict resolution, mediation, conciliation, and other nonviolent techniques including what is called, Track II diplomacy, as distinct from Track I or official diplomacy. Track II diplomacy consists of unofficial endeavors, usually by religious

and other nongovernmental groups and individuals to assist official negotia-
tions or to create an environment conducive to peace

    This has become a growth industry, as witnessed, for example, by
the work of the organization I used to work for, the U.S. Institute of Peace,
funded, by the U.S. Government, and founded in 1984 to promote less vio-
lent and nonviolent ways of mitigating conflict. This new interest is echoed
within the legal community and the growing attention to alternative dispute
resolution.

    There is a plethora of new books and studies in this area. Calvin
mentioned one, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*,[1] edited by
Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, but there are many others, as well.
Let me mention in particular a forthcoming book I happen to be the editor
of, and one I want to say a word about shortly. It is called *Peacemakers in
Action: Profiles in Religious Courage*,[2] to be published by Cambridge Uni-
versity Press next year, and it contains the case studies of some seventeen
religious peacemakers around the world. In my opinion, it constitutes an
important addition to the literature of religious peacemaking.

    We must also take note of the way terms like "forgiveness,"
"mercy," "reconciliation," and "restorative justice," words once the exclu-
sive property of theology and religious worship, have moved to the center of
public discussion. It is no longer unusual to hear politicians, lawyers, and
international relations experts uttering these terms in the context of trying to
find the best way to organize life in post-conflict settings, including making
provision for truth and reconciliation commissions and the like. While in
this new, broader environment, concepts like these undoubtedly become less
parochial and expand their meaning, it is unlikely they will ever lose their
religious significance altogether. This is still another illustration of the im-
portant changes that have taken place in regard to understanding the connec-
tions among religion, conflict, and peace.

    Finally, speaking of the book I am editing, *Peacemakers in Action*,[3]
I wanted to highlight something I am calling, "the hermeneutics of peace,"
an interpretive framework presupposed in one way or another by all the
religious peacemakers discussed in the book. The framework is grounded in
the conviction that the pursuit of justice and peace by peaceful means is a
sacred priority, and it is employed as a way of examining the texts, tradi-
tions, and practices of one religion or another for their contribution to the
promotion of justice and peace. This is a very important development, and

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[1]   RELIGION, THE MISSING DIMENSION OF STATECRAFT (Douglas Johnston & Cynthia
Sampson eds., 1994).

[2]   PEACEMAKERS IN ACTION: PROFILES IN RELIGIOUS COURAGE (David Little ed., forthcom-
ing 2006).

[3]   *Id.*

one that illustrates the impact the concern with peace and justice is having on theological thinking and training.

I shall divide the remainder of my remarks into two sections, "religion and conflict," and "religion and peace." Regarding "religion and conflict," let me address two general claims that are widespread and call for response. One is that real or authentic religion never causes or contributes to violent conflict; only "flawed" or "bad religion" does that. Again and again, one hears from religious leaders in combat zones that, "It's not our religion, properly understood, that has contributed to the conflict here. It's an abuse of that religion, a debasement of it. Please, don't confuse real religion with what you see here."

The second claim is heard mostly from social scientists, and is one that is very important for people in the field of the study for religion and conflict to deal with. The claim is that religion is not an important cause of violent conflict; rather it is economic and political conditions that are the crucial causal factors. If the social scientists who say these things are right—and they are influential, then, by implication, it is not religion, but political and economic conditions we ought primarily to be addressing in the interest of subduing violence. On that understanding, religion is at best a supplementary or secondary part of the solution.

Let us turn to answering these two claims. First, the assertion that real or authentic religion always brings peace ignores the fact that even the most enlightened and pacific religious people sometimes, as a matter of fact, heighten tension rather than relax it. They do that by resisting what they regard to be injustice and mistreatment. The American religious leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., used to tell those who blamed the civil rights movement in America for disturbing the peace that genuine peace is much more than the absence of violence. Genuine peace, King said, is based on justice and mutual respect, and these ideals are seldom achieved without arousing the hostility and often the violent response of the profiteers of oppression. In other words religion, even in its purest forms, is not innocent of connection to violence.

Of course the question of the moral responsibility of nonviolent actors like King and others is something else altogether. King and other peacemakers would hold, I think properly, that it is not they who are ultimately responsible for violence, but those who oppose the promotion of peace and justice by peaceful means in defense of wrongful interests. But even if they are not to blame, the most admirable exemplars of religion are nevertheless inextricably entangled with violence. Let us remember that not only King but other famous proponents of nonviolence, like Jesus and Gandhi, also met with violent deaths. The connections of religion and peace are, after all, more complicated than is frequently acknowledged.

The second claim regards social science findings. As I said, the connection between religion and conflict is a controversial subject among

social scientists. There continues to appear in the literature considerable skepticism regarding the role of religion as either a cause of conflict or a cause of peace. I shall mention two examples. Paul Collier, a well-known World Bank economist, has coined the phrase, "greed versus grievance," to describe his general conclusions regarding the causes of modern-day civil conflict.[4] According to Collier, it is economic greed, not grievance that primarily generates violence.[5] No grievances of any kind—religious, ethnic, political, or economic—are significant in accounting for civil conflicts.[6] It is the motivations, capacities, and opportunities of economic predators that make the difference.[7] Another example is the work of James Fearon and David Laitin in a recently published article called, "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War."[8] They take some issue with Collier, though they come to a similar conclusion. They contend that it is a combination of economic greed and political ineptitude, rather than religious, ethnic or other forms of grievance, that accounts for the rise of civil violence.[9]

As I say, if people like Collier, Fearon and Laitin are right, it is critical for the whole analysis of religion, conflict, and peace. From my point of view, the problem with the social science evidence and conclusions is that when you look at them carefully, they reveal a more complicated picture than the authors themselves allow for. In both the articles the evidence presented shows that grievance, at some stage in the course of a conflict, comes into play as a very important factor. In fact, I have identified three specific areas in which religious and other grievances appear to bear on and intensify violent conflict: 1) helping to legitimate an insurgency; 2) helping to recruit and motivate insurgents; and 3) identifying critical objects and areas of dispute, such as the disposition of sacred sites, and the accommodation of religious expression and practice, that will have in one way or another to be addressed in any satisfactory peace settlement.

Despite the tendency overtly to downplay the role of grievance—religious and otherwise—in regard to the causes of ethno-national civil war, the social science literature winds up, more or less inadvertently, underscoring the importance of, religious, cultural, and ethic grievances, both as a supporting cause of conflict, as well as a part of the solution. I may add that

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[4] Paul Collier, *Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy, in* TURBULENT PEACE: THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT 143, 143-162 (Chester A. Crocker, et al. eds., 2001).

[5] *Id.* at 144-145.

[6] *Id.*

[7] *Id.*

[8] James D. Fearon & David D. Laitin, *Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War*, 97 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 75 (2003).

[9] *Id.*

my own work on conflicts in Sri Lanka, Sudan, Bosnia, and elsewhere strengthens my convictions at this point.[10]

One word about the work of another social scientist who has done important work in the area of ethno-national conflict. His name is Ted Robert Gurr, and he has recently published three important books *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflict;*[11] *Peoples Versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century,*[12] and *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics.*[13] In the greed-versus-grievance debate, Gurr takes a strong stand on the side of grievance. In fact, that is the fundamental argument of all his work. In addition, he puts forward the arresting claim that, since 1995, there has been a sharp decline in the incidence of ethno-political conflict because of some noteworthy developments.[14] For example, in recent years, according to Gurr, governments have found new, more accommodating and less violent ways to deal with minorities.[15] Among other things, they have learned to address grievances frequently born of a sense of deprivation and discrimination, whether religious, cultural, economic, or political, as widely experienced, in particular, by minorities.[16] Incidentally, though Gurr does not emphasize the point, his conclusions are of enormous importance for religious actors. If it is true that extending rights of tolerance and nondiscrimination to minorities is leading more and more to a reduction of overall ethnic violence, this seems to be an area in which religious groups and individuals could play a highly significant role indeed. Unfortunately, Gurr's own work on the place of religion in conflict suffers from some of the same inconsistency and oversight that is characteristic of other social science work in the field. I have no time to elaborate the point, but it worth stressing that there is considerable room for improvement in the social scientific study of religion, conflict, and peace.

There are two areas in which religion is particularly important in the generation of violent conflict: One is nationalism, and the other is terrorism. In regard to nationalism, my work at U.S.I.P. generously mentioned by Calvin in his introduction, reinforced the point that I made earlier about the role of religion in legitimating and, recruiting participation in insurgencies, as

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[10]   *See* David Little, *Belief, Ethnicity, and Nationalism,* 1(2) NATIONALISM AND ETHNIC POLITICS (1995).

[11]   TED ROBERT GURR, MINORITIES AT RISK: A GLOBAL VIEW OF ETHNOPOLITICAL CONFLICT (1993) [hereinafter GURR, MINORITIES AT RISK].

[12]   TED ROBERT GURR, PEOPLES VERSUS STATES: MINORITIES AT RISK IN THE NEW CENTURY (2000).

[13]   TED ROBERT GURR & BARBARA HARFF, ETHNIC CONFLICT IN WORLD POLITICS (2d ed. 2003).

[14]   GURR, MINORITIES AT RISK, *supra* note 11.

[15]   *Id.*

[16]   *Id.*

well as in settling conflicts. If there is one general finding in the studies we did of Sri Lanka, Sudan, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, and so on, it was the point that religion, after all, often plays a very significant role in intensifying ethno-national conflicts.

A word in passing about the peace agreement in the Sudan, since the process of peacemaking there is related to the subject of federalism that we took up in such an interesting way this morning. The Sudan peace agreement, signed between the North and the South on January 9, 2005, is a federal arrangement. Under the agreement, the North and the South retain considerable regional autonomy, while at the same time submitting temporarily to an overarching federal structure with common political, economic, and security responsibilities and shared opportunities for governance. At the end of a six year probationary period, the South may decide whether or not to remain part of the structure or to secede and form an independent state. What I want to stress is the accommodation of religious difference as an indispensable and unavoidable factor in working out the Sudanese peace settlement. To be exact, the question of Islam and its relation to the government of the country lies at the heart of the conflict between the North and South and has been an absolutely central feature in achieving an agreement. [17] It is impossible to look at Sudan without taking account of the religious factor. Of course, religion does not stand alone; economics, oil, political concerns, etc. are also enormously important, but religion plays a critical role indeed.

Another passing word bearing on nationalist contests and their resolution—this one about Iraq, since that subject has also come up. I have been struck in the discussions of Iraq by the lack of attention the Bush administration and other observers have paid to the extensive political science literature concerning the difficulties of moving from authoritarianism to democracy, including federal democracy. For example, the work of Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*,[18] and Edward Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*,[19] brings out several key factors that spell serious political instability for countries, like Iraq, that are trying to establish some kind of secure federal system against a seriously dysfunctional background. Among other problems are the existence of high-energy politics, a weak central government, sharply-divided, combative, and well-organized political parties, and the absence of stable national and civic

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[17]   *See* FRANCIS M. DENG, WAR OF VISIONS: CONFLICT OF IDENTITIES IN THE SUDAN (1995).

[18]   JACK SNYDER, FROM VOTING TO VIOLENCE: DEMOCRATIZATION AND NATIONALIST CONFLICT (2000).

[19]   EDWARD MANSFIELD AND SNYDER, ELECTING TO FIGHT: WHY EMERGING DEMOCRACIES GO TO WAR (2005).

institutions. I would add that when these conditions are intermingled, as they surely are in Iraq, with strongly polarizing religious impulses, the odds for national stability are further reduced.

I am running out of time. I was going to say something about terrorism, but I better skip that. Perhaps we can talk about that in the discussion period. Having talked at length about religion and conflict, I need to conclude with some words about religion and peace.

The study of religion and peace can be divided into four areas: peace enforcement, peace making, by which I mean the arrangement of peace settlements, peace keeping, which is a third-party effort, usually but not always involving military support for whatever peace arrangements have been worked out, and, finally, peace building, which is the effort to create institutions and capacities, such as we have mentioned, to sustain and defend peace. It is particularly in the peace making and the peace building areas that religious actors have been significant. Let me give a few concluding examples of the way religious actors have contributed to peace building and peace making.

In regard to peace building there is an organization called the Bosnia-Herzegovina Inter-religious Council (IRC) that I, myself, when I was at USIP was, in a modest way, instrumental in helping to develop. That was a significant accomplishment, which, I think, retains some potential. The organization brings together leaders of the Jewish community, a small but significant population in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Serbian orthodox, the Croatian Catholics and the Bosniaks or Bosnian Muslims, and commits them to a concerted effort towards the support, reinforcement and expansion of the Dayton agreement. In this context the question of reconciliation has become a very important concern indeed.

I should like to tell one brief story regarding Mustafa Ceric, the leader of the Muslim community in Bosnia, and a member of the IRC. When I first met Mustafa Ceric, he told me that the idea of reconciliation is an imported Christian idea with no relevance to Bosnia. He and I had a number of discussions about that. Indeed, the IRC developed an interest in reconciliation among the different ethnoreligious groups in Bosnia, and the interesting thing is that Ceric gradually changed his mind on the subject. He mentioned this publicly at a meeting I attended in Albania last December. On the subject of reconciliation, he changed, he said, from his original, rejectionist view to a much more positive outlook. He came to believe that it is not just the former enemy who must make the first move. Instead, as Mustafa Ceric put it, the victims will themselves need to make an effort toward overcoming the hostility and the resentment created by violence and abuse. I have found that same spirit among other religious groups and leaders I have met with.

I also wanted to mention another group called, St. Egidio, a Roman Catholic lay order headquartered in Rome, which has both had success as

peacemakers, and been an inspiration to peacemakers everywhere, even in situations where peace was not achieved. The list of their activities goes on and on. In Mozambique they played an important role in offering good offices for the resolution of the conflict there. In both Kosovo and Algeria they outlined terms of agreement that, if followed, would surely have born fruit. Here is a religious body that uses its reputation for objectivity, acuteness and trustworthiness as a basis for building confidence and mutuality between conflicting parties.

In the book I am editing, *Peacemakers in Action,*[20] there are numerous edifying examples of effective efforts at religious peace building and peace making. Let me close by mentioning one of them. This is the remarkable tale of an American Presbyterian minister named William Lowery, who was active in Southern Sudan in helping to bring about a resolution of the severe conflict between the Dinka and the Nuer tribes. In an important way, the agreement consolidated the South and provided a crucial step toward arriving at the peace agreement worked out in January of 2005. Filled as it is with many instances of this kind, *Peacemakers in Action*[21] is one more important piece of evidence verifying the constructive contribution of religiously motivated individuals to the cause of peace.

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[20] PEACEMAKERS IN ACTION: PROFILES IN RELIGIOUS COURAGE, *supra* note 2.

[21] *Id.*